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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001423

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAL](#) [PREF](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: ANXIETY OVER PEACE PROSPECTS PROMPTS ONLINE
UPROAR, SELF CENSORSHIP IN JORDAN

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: An online column that criticized Palestinians in Jordan for failing to protest an Israeli proposal to turn Jordan into an alternative Palestinian homeland continues to reverberate locally. A June 10 column in Ammonnews touched a nerve in the country where Palestinians are the majority but where East Bank Jordanians control the government and Armed Forces. Ammonnews received hundreds of comments in response to the column, many of which were virulent and inflammatory. The reaction led Ammonnews to pull the column and comments from the website three days later for fear of a backlash or even public unrest. The Jordanian public is clearly anxious about concessions the country might be asked to make for peace. The media senses this anxiety but is worried about going too far in facilitating dialogue on this sensitive topic, leading to continued self censorship. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The article by Jordanian columnist Nahed Hattar analyzed Jordanian reaction to a recent Knesset bill proposing that Jordan be declared a Palestinian state. Hattar decried public silence by Jordanian Palestinians in response to this proposal. "We are still waiting for the Palestinian national elite groups and forces to break their silence, which hurts us, toward the U.S., official Arab, and Israeli plans," Hattar wrote in the column, which was published on one of the leading internet news sites in Jordan, Ammonnews.

¶3. (C) The column touched a nerve in Jordan, which is predominately Palestinian but in which East Bank Jordanians control the government and Armed Forces. Ammonnews received hundreds of comments to the column, some of which Ammonnews officials privately described as virulent and potentially destabilizing. The outspoken nature of the comments led Ammonnews to pull Hattar's column and the accompanying comments from the website three days later.

¶4. (C) In a June 15 meeting with Public Affairs Officer and LES colleague, Ammonnews co-owner and editor Samir Hiari and managing editor Basil Okoor said they decided to remove the column for several reasons. Foremost was their fear that the column would lead readers to speculate about possible Jordanian concessions in peace negotiations by the King (who is Hashemite and not from an East Bank tribe), in turn prompting a questioning of the monarchy and a backlash by authorities against the site. The Ammonnews officials also cited fears that a very public discussion of a taboo topic would cause advertisers to withdraw and that disagreements between agitated readers could even lead to widespread public unrest.

¶5. (C) While some advertisers made indirect comments to Hiari about the column, there was no pressure from Jordanian security services, as might have occurred under former General Intelligence Directorate (GID) head Mohammed Al-Dahabi, who was replaced in December 2008, the Ammonnews officials stated. While they welcomed a general decrease in

GID interference ever since, they said they were worried about possible consequences for crossing new, unstated boundaries for the media. They cited the opaque nature of decision-making by the King and his advisors, even as public anxiety has ballooned over possible Jordanian concessions as part of renewed efforts toward Middle East peace. "We don't know where the red lines are -- do we tackle issues linked to the peace process even more or do we stop?" Okoor asked. The King should be doing more to condition the public if possible concessions are being debated, Okoor stated. He asked why U.S. Senator George Mitchell had made public statements when visiting other countries in the region about U.S. efforts toward peace even as he had remained silent in Jordan.

¶6. (C) Even after the column's withdrawal, discussion of its author and content continued on other online sites, in editorial comments and among contacts. For example, two MPs and a group of Palestinian-origin sheikhs told Poloff on June 15 that Hattar did not represent mainstream Jordanian opinion. The sheikhs agreed that the issue of discrimination against Palestinians in Jordan was a red line that they were unwilling to address, even though they felt that they had legitimate complaints about distribution of resources and lack of access to the political sphere. A June 22 column by political science professor Mohammad Al-Momani in the independent Al-Ghad daily argued, "As far as Jordan is concerned, there is a need for more clarity and readiness for what we believe is coming and for pinning down the limits of political concessions."

¶7. (C) Comment: The immediate response to the column and the reverberation in editorials for two weeks indicates that

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the Jordanian public is clearly anxious about concessions the country might be asked to make for peace. The media, while enjoying what appears to be expanded freedom of expression, senses this anxiety but is worried about paying the consequences for crossing new, unstated boundaries.

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